

Experimental Television Center explores video as art in Binghamton

By Gerardine Wurzburg

After years of T.V. as theater, journalism, film and radio, people are investigating the electronic basis of the television image as an art. The explorations going on at several Centers in San Francisco, New York City, Boston, and Binghamton, N.Y. focus on video synthesizers and colorizers. (See below.)

Starting in 1967 an experimental video workshop was started at NET's San Francisco outlet, KQED, this workshop has since become the National Center for Experiments in Television. The same year a series of video experiments by artists were produced by WGBH, Boston's NET affiliate.

These groups and others were deeply influenced by the pioneering work of Eric Siegel and Nam June Paik on developing the video synthesizer.

From Portapak Access to Synthesizer Access

For about two years the Experimental Television Center in Binghamton, N.Y. operated a free equipment access center for the community. The emphasis was on people running the equipment on projects they designed, much like the operations at video access centers across the country. In June of 1973, "after failing to secure funding from the community for the program, the Center shifted its focus toward the art of television."

Operating under a grant from the N.Y. State Council on the Arts, the Center has fostered the development of video art by making video equipment, including the Paik-Abe Colour Video Synthesizer, available to any videomaker from N.Y. State. The Center provides instruction and technical assistance when needed, along with a warm place to sleep.

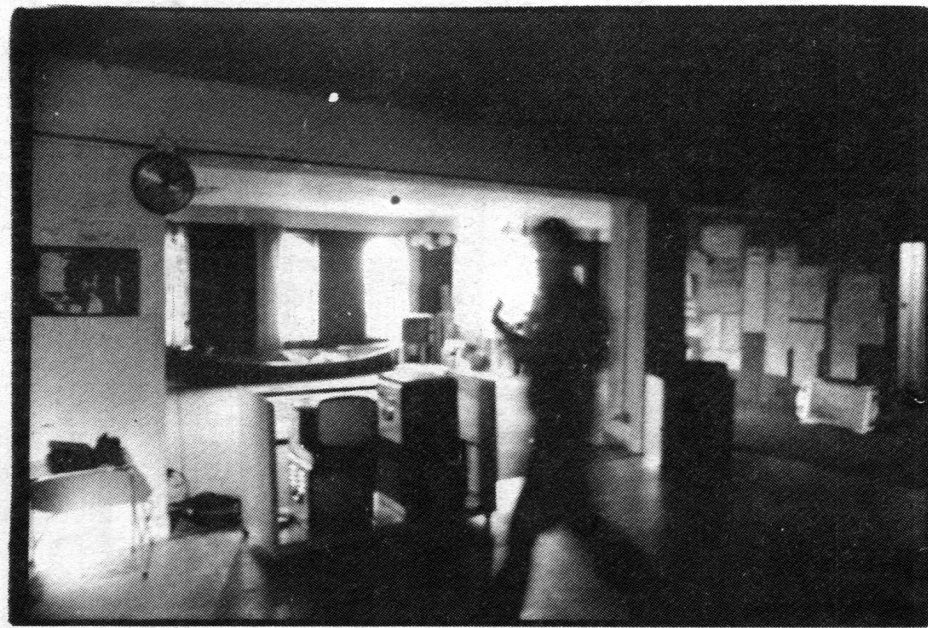
The Experimental Television Center occupies three floors of an old four story building, near a VFW Hall, on Court Street in Binghamton, N.Y. One floor has offices, a Paik-Abe Synthesizer, a darkroom, an electronics workbench, and a video projector. The other floors have living areas, and a most incredible collection of old TV sets, including the first color model, and the remains of TV sets from Nam June Paik's days there.

The staff is composed of four people: Ralph Hocking, director; Sherry Miller, assistant; Dave Jones, Technician; and Walter Wright, artist-in-residence.

The Center's prime concern is with training people in the use of synthesizers and helping other non-profit groups get synthesizers at their respective Centers. Ralph Hocking, the director stresses this aim: "We define ourselves as a place that builds and develops equipment and a place that acts as a production center for artists to work."

In building their equipment, they consciously keep the concept as simple as possible so that people with some background in video can readily understand and operate the synthesizer. "Even though some of our equipment is complex," Ralph said, "In concept, it is simple, just to keep it humane and so we don't scare people off."

Presently, they are working on a synthesizer that will be able to key on ten different levels



of gray. They hope to have that out in a year, and will make it available to non-profit organizations for as little as possible.

Video Art

Video as an art form is still very much an infant. Explorations in the medium hold endless possibilities; and the willingness to take risks is a necessity.

For the audience, unaccustomed to such 'distortion' the first viewing of a synthesized tape can be an unsettling experience. It is this 'visual disorientation' that occurs when people first watch a synthesized piece, that makes some kind of visual education a necessity.

As part of this 'visual education, the Center conducts workshops for groups interested in

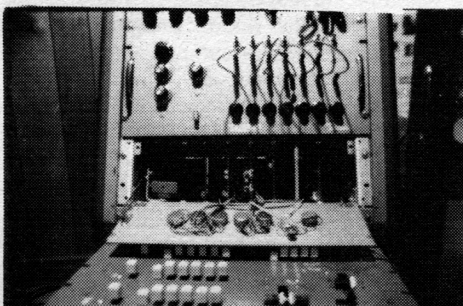
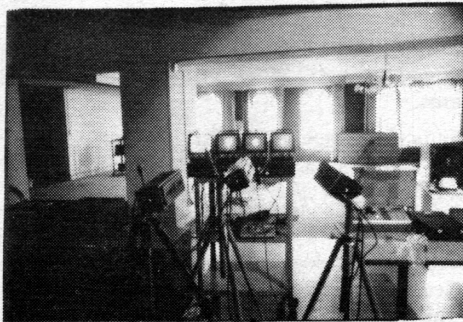
video as a medium for art activity.' Some of these involve the synthesizer.

Walter Wright and Ralph Hocking spoke of their experiences in these situations:

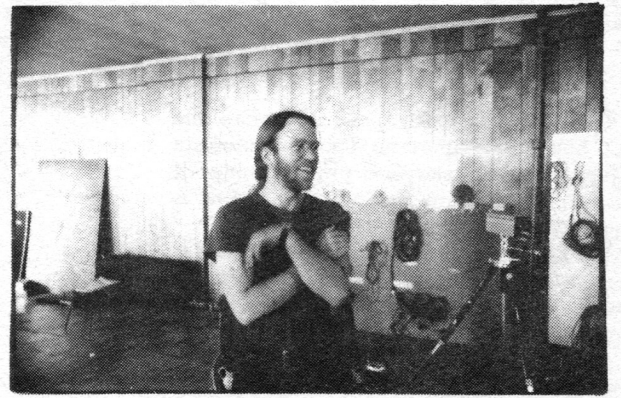
Walter: "It really is difficult to take this equipment out, to say a university, set it up and expect anything to happen immediately. First they come around and look at it and walk away, they think it's interesting, but they walk off. It is difficult to establish some sort of communication."

Ralph: What you do is get exposure that way and people sometimes come back to it. Sometimes on the third day they come back and want to work on the synthesizer.

Walter: Often when people first see it (synthesized work) they want to understand the structure but they can't perceive it immedi-



Views of the Paik-Abe Colour Synthesizer. Top right: synthesized image. Top left: View of synthesizer. Middle: Close-up of keyer, colorizer, and video mixer. Bottom: cameras shoot off monitors, these feed into the synthesizer.



Artist-in-residence Walter Wright [above] and Director Ralph Hocking [left] work at the Binghamton Center for Experiments in Television.

ately so they dismiss it as being disorganized. Or they can't see an organization to it, and they don't sit back, instead they are all the time trying to figure out what is happening rather than looking at it.

Viewing

The dream of many video artists, is that people will have synthesizers in their living room to play with at their leisure. A sophisticated 'entertainment center.' Others have used it as a concert, such as WGBH's series that artist-in-resident, Ron Hays did with synthesized images to classical music.

Having video cassettes of synthesized pieces in libraries is another possibility. People could take them out and go view them in bursts or whole, much the same way people read poetry, but this would be visual poetry.

Probably the most pleasurable work I've seen has been live, and in small settings. Walter also sees it as a more intimate event: "It is such a small screen and the contents of a lot of tapes made on this machine are very personal."

While some galleries and the like are pushing every piece of videotape by an artist, as art, Ralph Hocking is willing to be more patient: "I think the whole idea of video art is young. I want to stay there for awhile and I'm not in a rush to have a product."

SYNTHESIZER RESOURCES

Sources for information on Video Synthesizers:
Experimental Television Center, Ltd., 164 Court Street, Binghamton, New York 13901, 607/723-9509
National Center for Experiments in Television, at KQED, 1011 Bryant Street, San Francisco, California 94103, 415/864-3760
Video Support Project, 36 Decew Road, R.R. 1, St. Catherine, Ontario, Canada

Just what is a video synthesizer?

There are basically two types: Direct and Indirect Video Synthesizers. Direct synthesis creates patterns without external inputs; indirect modulates input from external sources. Synthesizers developed by Eric Segal and Stephen Beck work on the direct system; machines developed by Nam June Paik, Steve Rutt and Etra work on indirect principles.

- For direct synthesis the beam intensity is switched in varying time intervals which give you basic geometric patterns on the screen, across the raster of scan lines. These patterns can be developed on by feedback.

Several years ago I saw Stephen Beck working on the direct synthesizer he designed. I was amazed at how beautifully delicate his images were. Beck works at the National Center for Experiments in Television in San Francisco.

Beck's synthesizer generates two vertical and two horizontal lines. These positions can be changed by changing the time constants which determine their positions. Lines are cancelled by a logic circuit, leaving only dots where they cross.

- Nam June Paik's early experiments with magnetic distortion of the video image, form the root of indirect synthesis. In the video tube the raster of scan lines are generated by magnetic deflection of a single beam of electrons. Paik first used permanent magnets in his TV sets, which caused a constant distortion to all images. Later he went directly into the deflection coils which allowed him to have an external control system for distortion.

The machine up in Binghamton is a Paik-Abe Colour Video Synthesizer. It lets you mix together several inputs and then colorize them. Your inputs can be from cameras, straight from the oscillators which generate bars, and also from sound on a tape recorder or record which will also generate bars. There is also a high quality colour keyer built into it.